

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Eric Howell
In the Center and On the Throne
Isaiah 6
May 26

This morning's scripture texts are about revolution and revelation.

At the turn of the 16th century, Nicolaus Copernicus started a revolution. He formulated the theory that, contrary to appearances, the sun does not revolve around the earth, but the earth goes around the sun. It was a revolution. Can you imagine the intellectual and imaginative challenge this posed? Anyone can see plainly with their eyes the sun rise in the morning, track its course through the sky, and go down at night. You can literally see the sun going around the earth. Or you think you see that—until you learn that what you see isn't what you're seeing. And where you think you stand isn't where you're standing. You're not the center of the universe, and it's discombobulating.

Today's scripture passages are about conversion on the order of Copernican revolution—the kind of experience that changes a person—a person's whole way of seeing and standing changes through encounter with God. Nicodemus' way of seeing was changed the night he came to Jesus with the opening line: "Teacher, we know who you are." And Jesus basically responds, "Ya, thanks, but no, you don't even begin to know. Let me show you. Let me show you who I am. Let me show you who God is." We see in a new way.

Isaiah's experience was a conversion as well. He has a vision of God on a throne higher than he'd ever known and filling the temple beyond what his prayers had ever imagined. We stand in a new place.

These are stories not just about conversion but converting conversion—conversion isn't just a small change that you add to your life. Conversion is like an inner revolution. It changes the way you experience the world, yourself, and God. It doesn't always happen in just a moment. Though we often in our tradition talk about the moment of conversion, Conversion happens over a long period of time. It is a process of God working in us, but we can look back and see the ways that we're changed. We experience ourselves and the world and God in ways that we did no before, and this is grace.

The work of this grace begins, all conversions do, with getting ourselves out of the center of all things, a Copernican revolution—removing ourselves from the center and putting God in the center. God who, as it has been written, is "unknowable and yet profoundly known; God as invisible and yet personally accessible; God as distant and yet as intensely present. The infinite God thus becomes truly intimate in relating to the world."¹

¹ Bartholomew I, *Encountering the Mystery*

We miss all of that--we miss God, if we remain stuck in the idea that we are the center of the universe. The challenge is that everything about life and everything about our psychologies and everything about our economies and everything around us and within us seems to insist that yes, we are in fact the center of the universe and everything else revolves around me and my needs. Have you ever met someone and thought, "He thinks the world revolves around him." Well, in a way, we all do. This is the human condition of our limits. Most things in the world are set up to affirm this.

Our economic system is founded on the idea that balance is achieved when each person is rational and seeks their own advantage. What is moral? Increasingly, it is what feels right to you. What is rational? I think, therefore I am. I am the center of my universe. And if I'm powerful enough, I'm the center of yours, too.

A spiritual revolution begins in the heart of a person when they turn from themselves as center toward God as center. It is the most dramatic and most difficult and most necessary revolution there is. We miss everything good if we keep ourselves in the center.

When we search for what we should do in this life, how we should feel, how important our problems are, or how we should worry about something, we may place ourselves at the center of our world, and then try to make sense of it, with God part of our life. That's like dabbling a bit at religion. But then, we may experience our own Copernican revolution--a decentering of ourselves and new awareness that God is not part of our lives; rather we are part of God's life. And that is the beginning of a life of faith, hope, and love.

Isaiah's vision in chapter 6 describes just that change of perspective. The opening verse sets the stage, not in just Isaiah's own personal life, but in the life he shared with the whole nation, plunged into crisis. It was the year that king Uzziah died. Uzziah's death was a huge moment in Israel's history. He was the center of their world. He had reigned a long time, 52 years on the throne. For most of his reign, he was a good king. The economy was strong, the nation was at peace, and God was worshipped in the temple: all the things that are pointed to in ancient Israel on which rulers rise and fall: the economy, security, true worship. Uzziah, they said, was the greatest king since Solomon.

But Uzziah's story became a cautionary tale about pride. This is all from 2 Chronicles: Toward the end of his life, with words of affirmation and acclamation from his adoring subjects in his ear, he loses sight of his limits, even the limits of the king. He decides he is the center of the world and tries to take over the temple. The priests confront him, God smites him (a wonderful biblical word), and he spends the last decade of his life and reign sharing the throne with his son and more or less living in hiding.) It's a sad ending to an otherwise extraordinary life.

Still, for all of this, by the time Uzziah died, he had reigned for over 50 years. A whole generation of people had only known him as their ruler. But now he's died, the only king they had ever known, and the vacuum in their eyes and in their understanding of who they

are, the vacuum is intense and it's disorientating. Change always invokes anxieties. There are always winners and losers in any change. And everyone feels the anxiety when there is change—especially change on this kind of order. We can't relate to Israel having a king and then losing him, but we get a glimpse of it, and we feel a tinge of it in our major election years. Maybe you already feel the anxiety about this year that is to come—I heard an announcer say “The election isn't in November; the election is now.” Groan, we all reply. We feel the anxiety about it, don't we? How will it go? Who will prevail? What will that mean? How cold does it really get in Canada?

I don't mean to make too much light of it. The issues are real, and the implications are real. The election of the president is consequential—of course, it matters who is in the seat of power and what he—someday she--will do with that power. It matters also for how we understand the nation we live in and the people we are surrounded by. I've heard that more than once: I'm upset that Candidate X won, I'm more upset that I live amongst a people who chose him to win. I live amongst a people of unclean voting fingers. The thing is: you already do.

Whatever happens in November, you already live amongst a people of whom about a third will not vote, and of those who do about half will pick the candidate, or candidates, that make you want to move abroad. Whatever happens in November does not change that reality. You already live in that world—this is my pastoral word to you. Doesn't that make you feel better?

In Israel, they didn't have elections. That and a thousand other things make distance between the Isaiah context and ours, and we need to respect all of that distance. But the anxieties of change and rulership are real, the tendencies of both leaders and the led to make the leaders into gods are real, too. All of that—the change in power, the anxieties and fears about it, and the question: where is God? -- is the context for what happens next and the vision Isaiah receives and shares.

The vision reminds Isaiah and the people how to see and where they stand. At any time, but especially a time of change, anxiety, and fear, we are called upon and to bear witness to what we see and where we stand. In any place, but especially a place where we think the world revolves around us and our problems, we learn to see and bear witness to where we stand.

“I saw the Lord,” is always an audacious thing to say. In Israel's history, to see God meant you would be struck dead. Remember when God passes by Moses but shields his eyes with his hand until he passes? And yet, Isaiah says boldly: “I saw the Lord,” and lived to tell about it.

I saw the Lord on a high and lofty throne. No one else is on the throne—not myself, not any political ruler, not someone I trust, not someone I detest. No one else is on the throne of God. “I saw the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne”—that one line could be a prayer

mantra for any of us from now through November and January: “The Lord sits on a high and lofty throne.” Breathe deep. Let that be our prayer: *I see the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne.*

And the hem of his robe filled the temple. The Lord, the one sitting on the throne, was not even contained by the house of the Lord. The hem of his robe—or literally—a tassel on the bottom of his robe filled the space of the temple. Nowhere else in the Old Testament that I can recall, draws our spiritual eyes and theological imagination so profoundly to God as so really, really big.

Bigness isn’t really the point though; it’s that as God sits on the highest throne, so God exceeds the greatness of our worshipping acts and the greatness of our theological insights. God is above; God is beyond. It’s a revolution in what we see and where we stand. And it is good news.

Change may be coming at any point to any of our lives; problems may be real, but Isaiah’s vision is more than small change. It’s revolution—a Copernican revolution. A message to people living in uncertainty; a message to every person who feels like the world is too big and changing too fast and too dangerous. Or whose own world has gotten so small that they are the center of their story. Here is God on the highest throne; here is God, the temple doesn’t even contain a thread of his robe.

The world doesn’t revolve around the king; the world doesn’t revolve around ourselves—it doesn’t revolve around our worries or anxieties—as real as those are, or our hopes or dreams—as profound as those are. The world—and my place in it— doesn’t revolve around myself and my needs and my feelings. We’re not in the center. God is. Thanks be to God! It’s too great a weight to carry.

This is good news, a good news we come to remember when we come to worship. Worship is at its most basic is a regular reorientation of our consciousness and hearts—I am not in the center—I center myself in God, who is center. I am only centered when I am centered in God. This takes everything we have—and no small grace—to keep ourselves out of the center because the temptation is always to put ourselves there. No wonder Isaiah’s first response was confession—“Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips.” We all are.

But God’s mercy is everlasting; God’s atonement knows no end. Even for Isaiah the severe mercy of a hot coal to his unclean lips. When we see God, when we stand in God’s presence, we are free to say, “Here I am, send me.”

Send me into a world that scares me; into problems for which I don’t have all the answers; send me into human pain and need; into systems of injustice; into national anxieties; send me into my neighbor’s life with compassion; send me deep within myself to do the hard and holy work of the spiritual renewal I need.

Here I am. Not in the center. I am not God. But here I am, a willing servant. I know now where I stand. I know to whom I belong.

And I know to cry to you, “Abba, Father”. For you are a God—high and lofty, unknowable yet known, invisible yet accessible, distant yet present, infinite yet intimate; you are a God who so loved the world you gave your only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. It’s not just revolution. It’s revelation.

Thanks to God. Amen.

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